DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 168 UD 031 046

AUTHOR Danziger, Sandra K.; Farber, Naomi B.
TITLE Keeping Inner-City Youth in School: Critical Experiences of Black Young Women.
INSTITUTION Wisconsin Univ., Madison. Inst. for Research on Poverty.
SPONS AGENCY Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C.; Ford Foundation, New York, N.Y.; Michigan Univ., Ann Arbor. Rackham Graduate School.; Spencer Foundation, Chicago, Ill.
REPORT NO IRP-DP-931-90
PUB DATE Dec 90
NOTE 28p.
AVAILABLE FROM Institute for Research on Poverty, 1180 Observatory Dr., Madison, WI 53706 ($3.50).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Persistence; Adolescents; *Black Students; *Early Parenthood; Experience; *Females; Inner City; Interviews; Mothers; School Holding Power; *Social Support Groups; Urban Schools; *Urban Youth; Withdrawal (Education)
IDENTIFIERS Michigan (Detroit); Wisconsin (Milwaukee)

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes an understudied dimension of inner-city education--the diverse nature of women's personal experiences and levels of success in school and the kinds of supportive resources they receive. The data are from qualitative interviews with 53 black teen mothers and their nonparent peers who reside in Detroit (Michigan) or Milwaukee (Wisconsin). Findings suggest that, in general, the nonparents have more success in school; however, some teen mothers were relatively successful in remaining attached to schooling. The more successful young women cited support for schooling in the three broad categories of personal traits, family support, and role models in the community or school. The findings suggest that the worst educational consequences of early parenthood in this population may be mitigated by the intervention of caring individuals inside and external to the family and by nurturing the young women's personal strengths. Social work research and practice should assess these components and their relationships shared by many inner-city women so as to develop better ways to nurture their attachment to schooling. (Contains 2 tables and 21 references.) (Author/SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Institute for Research on Poverty

Discussion Papers

ED 397 168

Sandra K. Danziger
Naomi B. Farber

KEEPING INNER-CITY YOUTH IN SCHOOL: CRITICAL EXPERIENCES OF BLACK YOUNG WOMEN

DP # 931-90

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Bert Penn
Inst. for Res & Poverty

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

UD031046

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Institute for Research on Poverty
Discussion Paper No. 931-90

Keeping Inner-City Youth in School:

Critical Experiences of Black Young Women

Sandra K. Danziger
School of Social Work
University of Michigan

Naomi B. Farber
School of Social Work
University of Wisconsin-Madison

December 1990

The authors gratefully acknowledge support from the Ford Foundation, Spencer Foundation, the Rackham Graduate School of the University of Michigan, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Comments of Kathy Bell, Sheldon Danziger, Traci Dietz, Julia Durand, Julie Henly, and Esther Wattenberg were helpful on earlier drafts. Any opinions expressed are solely those of the authors.

Abstract

This paper analyzes an understudied dimension of inner-city education--the diverse nature of young women's personal experiences and levels of success in school and the kinds of supportive resources they receive. The data are from qualitative interviews with 53 black teen mothers and their nonparent peers who reside in Detroit or Milwaukee. Findings suggest that, in general, the nonparents have more success in school; however, some teen mothers were relatively successful in remaining attached to schooling. The more successful young women cited support for schooling in the three broad categories of personal traits, family support, and role models in the community and/or school. The findings suggest that the worst educational consequences of early parenthood in this population may be mitigated by the intervention of caring individuals inside and external to the family and by nurturing the young women's personal strengths. Social work research and practice should assess these components and their relationships shared by many inner-city women so as to develop better ways to nurture their attachment to schooling.

Keeping Inner-City Youth in School:
Critical Experiences of Black Young Women

INTRODUCTION

The importance of education for economic success in our society is axiomatic. In discussing the significance of education, Glazer (1986) asserts, "Education is the best single available route to overcoming poverty." Thus, the relatively low levels of educational attainment among poor black youth in urban communities is a serious problem whose consequences are borne by the young men and women themselves, their offspring and families, and by the larger society responsible for supporting its economically dependent members.

In recent years, the overall high school dropout rate among black youths declined (Wilson, 1987). But this trend masks both the disproportionate dropout rates of impoverished inner-city young men and women, their high rates of illiteracy, and their low levels of work-related skills. For example, the New York Urban League (1984) reported that in 1984, 78 percent of black adolescents in New York City did not complete high school, in comparison with a citywide dropout rate of 45 percent. Similarly, of the 25,500 minority students enrolled in ninth grade in Chicago's inner-city schools in 1980, 16,000 or 63 percent did not graduate four years later (Wilson, 1987). Recent research suggests that such factors as the inferior quality of schools, lack of community and neighborhood resources and services, poor housing, health care and child care, and the discouraged and pessimistic views of family and community members for their children's future all contribute to low rates of school completion and educational achievement (Ogbu, 1988; Clark, 1983; Tobias, 1989).

High rates of adolescent pregnancy and childbearing occur in these impoverished inner-city communities. Teen pregnancy and birth are often associated with school disruption and dropping out, resulting in an increased risk of long-term negative consequences for the economic well-being of

young women and their offspring (Moore, Simms, and Betsey, 1986; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, and Morgan, 1987). The relationship, however, between school performance and completion and adolescent pregnancy is complex. For example, many young women experience problems in school such as poor grades or attendance prior to becoming pregnant. Among other teens, the physical, social, and emotional demands of pregnancy, birth, and childrearing directly precipitate dropping out of school.

In the past, many researchers, policymakers, and service providers assumed that pregnancy was the primary reason why young women dropped out of school. Today, however, there is a growing debate over which condition--pregnancy itself or the multiple stresses of living in extreme poverty--contributes more to poor educational outcomes among inner-city girls. There is a growing consensus that a close, if poorly understood, relationship exists between educational and vocational opportunities and skills on the one hand, and the incidence of adolescent childbearing in the inner cities on the other (Hayes, 1987). The material and psychological disadvantages of living in impoverished communities are typically compounded by early childbearing and school problems. Such hardships increase the difficulties of leaving the ranks of the impoverished.

With a few notable exceptions, most recent research on adolescent pregnancy and childbearing and educational attainment use survey methods to examine associations between various demographic characteristics such as race, income, or family structure and the educational outcomes among childbearing adolescents (see, for example, Mott and Marsiglio, 1985; Hofferth and Moore, 1979; Waite and Moore, 1978). While this literature is important in describing the dimensions of educational attainment and failure, more information about the actual dynamics of schooling in the inner city is needed.

Many poor young women in these communities have educational and vocational aspirations beyond their present circumstances, but face significant obstacles to fulfilling those dreams (Farber,

1989). An examination of young women's personal experiences in and perceptions about school can illuminate some of the reasons for this gap between aspirations and achievement and some of the factors that may enhance educational performance. In this paper, we offer findings about an understudied dimension of inner-city education among young women. We describe the schooling experiences of a group of black inner-city young women, some of whom have become teen mothers and some of whom have not. We focus on two aspects of their education: first, the diverse nature of their personal experiences as students, examined in the framework of the range of levels of educational success and commitment to school; and second, the resources in their lives that they believe have helped or hindered their ability to attain such success. Academic success is defined here as the degree to which the young woman stayed involved with and committed to her education long enough to reach either an age-appropriate grade level, high school graduation, or some post-high school training. We view "resources" as the kinds of socio-emotional support for school that the young women report receiving. We identify the sources of this support (or lack thereof) and describe the nature of its expression and the perception or experience of that support from the young women's perspectives.

Clark (1983), Ogbu (1985), and others have written about the components of family life, school and peer culture, and the social institutions, such as the church, that are likely to promote or inhibit the development of "school survival strategies" or "instrumental competencies" among inner-city black children. These "components" parallel and complement what Garmezy (1988) calls the "triad" of potentially protective factors enhancing adolescents' resilience to stress. Recent research by Garmezy (1988), Hauser, et al. (1989), and others suggests three types of factors that contribute to resilience among children. In relation to research about "competent" black children, these include: "(1) dispositional attributes in the child, (2) family cohesion and warmth, and (3) support figures in

the environment and in the schools who can serve as identification models for the child" (Garmezy, 1988).

This framework closely resembles the themes emerging from the life histories of the young women in this study. Thus, it is applied in comparing and contrasting the personal accounts of young women who have extremely diverse schooling experiences. The personal accounts are analyzed to highlight what the women themselves identify as helpful or detrimental to their educational success.

THE STUDY

Sample Description

Between July 1987 and August 1989 we conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with over 160 young women, aged 15 to 22, who resided in inner-city communities of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Detroit, Michigan. Approximately half of the women gave birth to at least one child as an adolescent; the other half were nonparent peers from the same communities. The breakdown by city and parenting status is as follows:

	Teen Mothers	Nonparent Peers
Detroit	43	38
Milwaukee	40	41

Participants were recruited in a variety of ways. In Milwaukee we began by contacting a number of young women who had participated in an earlier survey of clients of teen-parent programs conducted by one of the authors (Danziger and Radin, 1990). From this core of teen mothers, snowball sampling was used to get referrals of other potential participants from their families and communities. A few teens were referred by two community alternative schools. In Detroit, most participants were obtained through several community agencies that provide a range of youth services,

including alternative schooling, teen-parent services, and youth summer employment. Participant referrals (snowball sampling) were also used in Detroit.

Data Collection and Analysis

We elicited from each participant a personal account of her "life story" in order to construct a modified or focused life history. In this paper, we report on a randomly selected subset of 53 participants: 26 teen mothers and 27 nonparent peers from the two sites. While the coding of educational experiences reported here will continue to be replicated with the full sample, this report based on 53 cases represents an unusually extensive data set for qualitative methods research (see Miles and Huberman, 1984; Patton, 1980).

We conducted two intensive interviews (one to two hours each) with most young women and continue to follow up on those with whom we are able to stay in contact. Interviews in Milwaukee were generally conducted in respondents' homes, and in Detroit at the site of the contact agency.

Our original guiding research question was how some young women avoid single motherhood and attain higher levels of education and employment in comparison with those in a similar environment who become single mothers and are at increased risk for welfare recipiency. What, if anything, about a young woman's family and upbringing, ideals, sense of self, and opportunities contributes to her making certain choices at various critical points?

The open-ended interviews focused on descriptions of the women's ideals and actual behavior in relation to a variety of contexts including educational, peer, and community environments and the family. Of particular interest in regard to educational attainment were the women's perceptions of the availability of guidance and socio-emotional resources and the presence or absence of supportive role models, and how all of these changed over their years of schooling. The qualitative approach focuses on the subjective context of the young women's lives and the process through which they come to different life circumstances as they enter adulthood.

We focus first on the women's levels of educational attainment and corresponding strength of attachment to school. Then, the three major areas of resources that young women identify as important to their educational progress are analyzed. Finally, the implications of these findings for social work research and practice are discussed.

Patterns of School Attachment

The women described a variety of attitudes and experiences over the course of their school careers. One critical factor is how far they went in school, or their level of educational attainment, shown in Table 1. The girls are divided into two age groups, 18 to 21 and 15 to 18 (school-aged); for the former, the categories of educational attainment are "currently enrolled in high school or G.E.D. classes," "obtained diploma or G.E.D.," "enrolled in post-high school training or college," and "dropped out of high school"; for the latter, the categories are "currently enrolled in high school," "left school, currently in G.E.D. program," and "dropped out of high school."

In Table 1, the top panel presents the schooling obtained by the older group in our study, those over 18 years of age (n = 21). Only one (a nonparent peer) was currently enrolled in a high school program; three had dropped out (all teen mothers). Out of the 17 who had either obtained their diplomas or their G.E.D. degrees, nine had gone on to community or technical colleges, or even to four-year colleges. Among the school-aged group, many more teen mothers had left school (11 of 17), while their nonparent peers were more likely to be still enrolled (8 of 15). Of the remaining nonparent peers, six were in G.E.D. programs, and one had dropped out.

This range of educational attainment was reflected in different attitudes toward schools and education in general, and different levels of involvement in school over the years. These patterns of attitudes and behaviors may be conceived of as a continuum of strength of commitment or attachment to school. Strength of attachment to school is suggested by several recurring themes in the accounts

Table 1

Education Levels of Black Inner-City Young Women
in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Detroit, Michigan (n=53)

	Teen Mothers	Nonparent Peers	Total
Ages 18+ to 21			
Currently enrolled in high school or G.E.D. classes	0	1	1
Obtained diploma or G.E.D.	4	4	8
Enrolled in post h.s. training or college	2	7	9
Dropped out of high school	3	0	3
Total	9	12	21
School-Aged, 15 to 18			
Currently enrolled in high school	5	8	13
Left school, currently in G.E.D. program	1	6	7
Dropped out of high school	11	1	1
Total	17	15	32

Source: Interviews by the authors, July 1987 to August 1989.

of these women. Discussions of the importance of school in their every day lives and in their future plans, the degree of pleasure associated with being in school, concrete involvement in school life (e.g., academic or extracurricular activities), and the importance of being a student to their self-image were common.

At one end of the continuum are those young women who were, at the time of the interview, still attending school at an age-appropriate grade level, or who had completed high school "on time" (at about age 18). Women in this group, generally in the top rows of each panel in Table 1, expressed positive attitudes toward school and their own experiences as students, and many had won honors and prizes in school. They often evaluated their general well-being and that of other people by performance at school. The indicators of performance included grades, attendance, and participation in school-related activities such as athletics, dance or music performance, or other clubs. Among those with a strong attachment, school was referred to when discussing family, friends, hopes for the future, sources of pleasure, and satisfaction.

One Milwaukee nonparent peer suggests a typical sense of enjoyment of school, based on a feeling of "belonging," derived from participation in extracurricular activities.

> Oh, to me, it's all a plus, I don't think it's any minuses. They say, like if you just go to high school and don't do anything, you be bored, you're going to hate high school. You're going to say, "Well, it's another day and nothing there." But if you join an activity, you're going to be like, well, you know. Like me, I was in band, I just loved band practice, even though I couldn't play an instrument but I was the color guard captain. It was so much fun, you know, just going to games and, you know, being part of the school. You know, if you just go there and just say, I just go to this school but if you can say, well I'm on the basketball team, like I was, I'm a color guard, you know it's like you're really a part of that school, if you really go out for something, you know. It's a lot of things.

For some young women, maintaining good or at least passing grades was important for their self-esteem. One Detroit nonparent peer who had faced many personal and family crises throughout her childhood describes how her school performance was one measure of her coping abilities.

> So I didn't really, it [the crises] bothered me, but I kept my grades up and everything. I think I was strong enough to go through that.

A somewhat less solid commitment to schooling was observed among the women who had left school for some period, but later returned to obtain either a G.E.D. or a diploma. Many in this group had future vocational or college goals and plans, as did those in the first group; however, they commonly expressed an ambivalence toward school, often because their experiences were less satisfying or unpleasant. Whereas those with the strongest attachment seemed to find intrinsic pleasure or satisfaction in attending school, women in this second group valued school more as a means to an end. They viewed education as a necessary "ticket" to future opportunity, sometimes explicitly as the best way to avoid welfare dependence. Generally they did not appear to enjoy school or the life of a student, but the importance of resulting credentials were viewed as sufficient motivation to persist despite the problems so many had in just staying in school.

One respondent in Detroit described how she left school and found her way to an alternative G.E.D. program. Her story includes the common theme of getting into trouble at school by hanging out with "the wrong crowd."

> So I started havin' friends that she [her mother] didn't really approve of. I thought it was my decision to have the friends I wanted. So through that, in the 9th grade, through hangin' around people I shouldn't have, I ended dropping out; I didn't really drop out, I just didn't go. So, because of that I finally dropped out. My mother, she finally found out so I didn't go any more. I just didn't go. And so what I was out for 2 or 3 years. Just last year I started comin' to [Program] for high school dropouts. So far I've been doing good here, you know, as soon as I--in the other schools I was in, it seemed like I never had a real confidence level--confident that I could do certain things. You know, that I didn't have to hang around with certain people, I could do it on my own and they have sort of helped me here. You know, sometimes I didn't really feel like anyone cared so I said, "Why should I go to school?" So I'm here now.

Another participant in the same program expressed the very specific and important role that education played in her life.

> I went to [night school] on my own 'cause I was staying with my father. And I started messing up there and so I got into [Program] and I feel as though they've

> helped me out a lot. And turning me back around 'cause nowadays if you don't get no education you can't get no jobs; you can't get no job really without an education unless you want a minimum wage job and you can't take care of yourself without an education. Now I kinda look further in my life and see what I want to do--I want to be in cosmetology or, ah, data entry.

At the other end of the continuum of attachment to school are those women who are almost or completely detached from school. Almost all are teen mothers who have dropped out and have no concrete plans to return for a diploma, a G.E.D., or vocational training. Many described school as an unpleasant, often harsh experience. For them, school had no immediate or long-term value, either in and of itself or as an investment in their future. Typical of this detached group is a 15-year-old mother in Milwaukee who does not want to repeat eighth grade after her pregnancy. "Bertha Lee" described her lack of motivation to get up and go to school in the following way:

> Sometimes I just don't get up to go to school because I don't want to 'cause it's nothing to look forward to. No excitement. . . . It's just you and your baby or whatever and all you got to look forward to is pick the baby up on my lunch break. What do I eat? Nothing. You know what I mean? It's nothing. That's why I just lay in the bed and then I may get up and attend on her and then phone to whoever is at home or, you know, just sit there and be bored all day planning on what I should do to get out of this mess, you know. And it's something that the people that are trying to help me, and I'm afraid to ask them 'cause I know the things they going to say to me. So that's what's it's really like. It's really closed doors to me.

Perceived Resources and The Quality of School Experience

Many respondents identified quite clearly what or who they considered to be the greatest influences in their remaining in or quitting school and in helping them in their academic efforts. The influences they identified fall into three broad categories: family factors, personal strengths or self-motivation, and characteristics of members of their school or self-identified community. These three categories of resources emerge from strikingly consistent themes in the young women's perspectives on their educational experiences.

In general, resources were reported to a far greater extent among those who were successful in school. Table 2 shows the proportion reporting each type of resource among nonparent peers in

school, teen mothers in school, and teen mothers who were dropouts. These groups form a continuum of attachment to school as reported in Table 1, and also a continuum of supports. In each type of resource, nonparent peers are more likely to experience receiving help and the teen parent dropouts are most likely to report the absence of support.

Family Resources

In this discussion of family resources, our focus is limited to those aspects of family life which the women report to have directly influenced their educational performance. This leaves unexplored important areas for further analysis, such as the effects on education of family system dynamics, substance abuse, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and so on.

The respondents describe many ways in which family members supported school attendance and performance. Twenty-three of the women, eight teen mothers and 15 nonparent peers, describe strong familial support for school. As shown in Table 2, this form of support was very rare among mothers who were out of school. As to how the teens experience this help, some was in the form of parents or other adult family members clearly setting and communicating specific expectations for school performance and attainment, expressing values about the importance of education, and/or consciously acting as models to emulate or avoid.

One Milwaukee peer describes how her mother encouraged her to avoid her own mistakes.

> Well, school was fun, I liked it because of the activities. My mother, she always encouraged us to do a lot of more things in school since she really didn't do too much 'cause she was teen pregnancy. And she wanted us, she'd tell us about, you know, do more, don't, you know, be trying to get tied down to no baby. So everything I wanted to go out for, she encouraged us to do it.

A combination of these parental efforts was described by a Milwaukee nonparent peer who graduated from high school. She grew up with her mother only, but her father maintained his authority from a distance.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Table 2

Proportion of Black Inner-City Women in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Detroit, Michigan, with Each Type of Socio-emotional Support for Schooling

	Nonparent Peers (n=26)	Teen Mothers in or Completed School (n=12)	Teen Mothers Out of School (n=14)
Family support	15/26	7/12	1/14
Positive personal resources	22/26	7/12	6/14
Community/school resources	15/26	5/12	2/14

Source: Interviews by the authors, July 1987 to August 1989.

Note: The one nonparent peer who had dropped out of school was omitted from this comparison; however, she reported none of these supports.

> Yes, my father really, as far as education influenced me the most of all over my mother. . . . He graduated and everything, he told us, "You must get an education. . . . . You got to finish high school no matter what. . . .
>
> Yes, oh, I had to listen to [my parents], you know, they had their hold on me, you know. I couldn't get away with a lot of things. My mother and father looked at me step for step.

She went on to express an extremely common source of educational aspiration, "I don't want to have my parents [let] down." This can be a powerful source of support in the worst of circumstances, as in the case of one mother from Milwaukee who had raised three children, graduated from high school, and started college by age 19. She had a stormy early adolescence, was pregnant at age 14, and at 15 married an unstable young man who abused drugs and alcohol. Yet, she managed to stay in school, partially attributing her resilience and dedication to "keep going" to her family.

> And you know, she [my mother] told me, my father also, that the hardest I'm trying to do something and be somebody, that sooner or later, I get a break. To keep trying, not to give up. And you know before I had kids it was just, you know, mainly about staying in school, you know, you doing good and you know they reward me greatly for the things I did in school. They had trophies, I won trophies and stuff like that. And you know they always rewarded me you know with things that made me want to keep going to school. Not just because of rewards, but school always seemed simple to me but then when I was getting those 4-points and everybody's make such a big deal, you know, out of me being such, so smart and everything, it made me want to try harder, you know. It made me, you know, say, "Well, if I'm doing this with a breeze just getting by and if I really put into it, you know what's going to happen, you know. You know, they encouraged me about school and you know not having kids and you know getting involved with boys seriously and stuff like that which is what I done the opposite, but afterwards and have the kids and everything I most definitely follow any advice my mother and father give me because I feel like the things they told me, this is going to happen, this is going to happen.

In mentioning receiving rewards for good performance, this respondent suggests another important area of family support for school: the direct reinforcement of parents' hopes and expectations through such concrete actions as supervising and checking homework, setting and enforcing curfews on school nights, attending parent-teacher conferences, and other forms of active involvement. Other young women report parents and family members engaging in various

combinations of such activities. One Milwaukee peer, a high school graduate, said no one supervised her homework daily, but her parents did monitor her grades closely.

> Like, for instance, if I have a bad report card, you know, some people say you're on punishment for 2 weeks. I was in punishment for 6 weeks and as soon as [my parents] seen that report card was going up, that's when I'm off.

Another example is a multitalented high school senior in a school for college-bound students who stated that though she is the only member of her family who was "motivated," her mother strictly supervised her academic work.

> I guess you could say my mother motivated me. . . I didn't realize it 'til now. . . . She used to make me sit there writing, writing, writing. . . . My mother put me through so much torture. She made me sit there and learn the stuff, and learn it and learn it.

The potential significance of direct and consistent involvement by parents in reinforcing general expectations can be seen in the contrasting account of a teen mother who dropped out after seventh grade. Her mother wanted her to "have a diploma," but provided no supervision or discipline.

> My mother, she always encourages me but it's just that since she don't know actually how to do it with us, then it really wasn't no real big thing. . . I be like, well, I gotta do my homework, I gotta do this and my mother want me to do that. And you know, I gotta do this 'cause my mother gonna get me. But I didn't care if my mother got me 'cause I knew she wouldn't. . . . She was a young mother, so she be gone all the time. . . . My grandmother, she was too busy drinking, she never taught us right from wrong.

Personal Resources

Another prominent theme in the life histories of many in this study was the presence of personal strengths, evident as teens' own expectations and drive to stay in school. Of the 35 young women who describe themselves as possessing these positive attributes, 22 were peers and 13 were mothers. As shown in Table 2, almost all peers reported these resources, compared with half of the teen mothers.

In several instances, when family support was conspicuously absent, or occurred in the context of emotional, social, and economic patterns suggestive of impaired family functioning, the women attributed their success to personal qualities or to their desire to achieve beyond what others "never bothered to expect" of them. There was, indeed, a marked contrast between those who placed responsibility for their failures on the family, and those who believed they themselves were primarily responsible for their performance in school. The latter tended to be those who succeeded in school. Young women who perceived minimal family support often sought support outside of the family, as will be described below. It is significant, however, that the tendency to seek and take advantage of extrafamilial resources nearly always went hand-in-hand with unmistakable expressions of self-direction, confidence, and self-motivation in and out of school.

It was not uncommon for those with personal strengths to give as an example of their commitment a self-initiated effort to transfer to a high school outside of their neighborhood, one which they believed would offer a better education. For example, two women in Milwaukee requested transfers to predominantly white, suburban high schools. Some others, particularly in Detroit, chose schools in the city which they thought were academically superior or were less dangerous and "rough" than their local schools.

Personal strengths are exemplified in several young women's self-assessments and perceptions regarding their abilities. One Milwaukee peer described her abilities and motivation to succeed in school and sports.

> I learn things easy, especially math and sciences and things like that. . . . A lot of things come easy. . . . . I don't consider myself good. I mean I consider myself good in everything I do, but not great in anything I do. . . . I don't know, I just like to be different from everybody, I strive to be different. And I'm the only other teenager that was in the neighborhood that's doing anything. . . . I don't quit. I just try.

Others who remained in or finished school in inner-city schools often defined themselves as "good girls" who did not "get into trouble" at school and tried to do well. They chose friends who

were like-minded, seeming to insulate or protect themselves somewhat from the negative influences around them.

One respondent illustrates how crucial personal strengths can be in surviving extraordinarily harsh life circumstances. "Sonya," a teen mother in Detroit, dropped out of school after eighth grade when she was 16. By the time her baby was three-months old, Sonya was attending beauty school and was planning to take the G.E.D. test. She began her interview by stating that her "life at school was a wreck."

> 'Cause my mother was, my mother was on, my was, well she still is I mean, but I don't stay with my mother, my mother she's on, she on drugs, and everything and she wouldn't send me to school. . . . and she wouldn't give me bus fare to go to school. So when I did go, you know, I was always behind and stuff at school and . . . my mom would only let me go every once in a while. And when I did go I was always behind in class. . . . 'Cause she was doin' hypo needle drugs, she, you know, she would never give me bus fare to go to school. So then she just, so finally I got to the 9th grade - I messed up in the 9th grade 'cause I ain't never go. So they put me back in the 8th grade and they say I'm not ready to be in high school.

Sonya's response to school failure, parental neglect, and having to cope with a seriously ill baby was to reject the example of those around her, pull herself together, and throw herself wholeheartedly into the things she loved--her child and "doing hair." When talking about how hard she works she says:

> I do hair all day long, all day long. . . I do, 'cause I don't want to be, the type of person that got to do what my mother did. You know, leave us and stuff, and wouldn't take care of us and stuff, and sit around and wait on her ADC check and then she wouldn't spend it on us and stuff. And I just don't, you know, if it comes down to where I just have to get on aid or something, you know, I will accept it, 'cause I don't have you know I don't have too much pride where I can't accept hand-outs, you know. I don't want to get into that boat. I want to get out and do for me and my child and get a job and everything. 'Cause my mother, she ain't cared too much. Well, she might have cared but she just had a habit. And she ain't cared too much, she ain't do too much for us like I plan to do for mine.

This confidence and sense of efficacy in the face of daunting odds stands in marked contrast to others who lacked personal resources. One Milwaukee teen mother said she did not pursue adequate help to act on her stated desire to finish school.

> I got a real bad negative attitude. I got like no hope and no future. I feel like, it's like there, but I just ain't got no hope for the school no more.

The notion of personal resources is quite complex, and raises a number of important questions such as the origin of internal resiliency and how it is nurtured under adverse circumstances. The following discussion suggests that one source of nurturance of personal strengths can be extrafamilial supports in school or the community.

Extrafamilial Resources

Twenty-two young women said that they received the support of individuals outside of the family to keep working toward achieving their aspirations. As seen in Table 2, this was most frequent among peers (15/26), next among mothers in school (5/12), and most rare among the mothers who were out of school (2/14).

In some cases, when the women reported minimal family resources, they described how individuals at school or in the community reinforced their own strengths and motivation to overcome family and personal threats to schooling. In essence, the extrafamilial support sometimes compensated for instead of supplemented the support (or lack thereof) found at home. The most commonly identified sources of this support were adults who were not the women's own parents, such as teachers, mothers of friends, athletic or arts coaches, older friends, and occasionally boyfriends. This support was defined by the respondents in terms of whether the person conveyed an expectation of achievement or a sense of concern about their well-being and performance, exhibited behavior worthy of a desirable role model, or if they just took the time to listen and talk to them.

The influence of one dedicated school teacher is illustrated by a college-bound Milwaukee peer from a troubled and chaotic family. She described the role of her school dance teacher, her "second mother," in motivating her in school.

> Well, she. . . . okay . . . um, she's like a second mother. . . . She's very sweet, but she's hard on you, you know, as far as, you know, . . . as long as you bring home a

> 2.5 or better, you know, she know that you were doing something right. . . . so, you know, she'll sit down and talk to you and ask you questions. . . She'll ask you if you're on drugs. . . . well, she won't actually ask you. . . . she'll get around, beat around the bush. . . . Something like "No, I don't think you smoke, no. . . ." Things like that. She just want to make sure you're healthy. . . . especially if you're dancing. . . the hardest we've danced, the faster than this. . . . embarrassing if you fall out on her, she wouldn't know what to do!. . . . I can talk to her about anything, you know. Like, if I have a problem at home, me mother or something, you know, I can talk to Miss G. . . . She will sit and listen. . . . And, you know, she's always, she's like a comforter. . . . you know, it's comforting. . . . you know, confidence, and tell you go on . . . . She'll help you out a lot, like that.

Another Milwaukee peer believed her teachers were responsible for "motivating" her because they "challenged" her in class. Her desire to stay on the school track team was a constant incentive to maintain good grades, and reinforced her desire to do well.

> Oh, I have to maintain a 2.5 grade point average, and I always panic. Especially during track season, because during track season it's like I slack up on just about everything. And I'll get a 2.7. . . . got C's. . . . I don't like C's. It's just fun. . . . That's more of . . . what makes me keep my grades up, I guess. 'Cause I like staying out in sports. Therefore, I have to keep a 2.5 grade point average, and who wants a 2.5? I want a 3.0. . . . When I get a 2.7, I cry. I don't know, it's just a challenge.

One Milwaukee peer who grew up in very difficult family circumstances with little parental help was encouraged to stay in school by caring teachers at the technical school she attended.

> At first I was having problems with like math. My sister was real good in math, so as far as that goes, having somebody to help me with. . . . Other than that, it was all, you know, you'd go off on your own, the teacher'd push you, you know, and tell you, "If you can't get this done, then you come in. . . ." It was the teachers, just pushing you, pushing you forward, trying to push you on. . . . I was having my first drafting when I was in mechanical drafting. And, you know, I went into the classroom with the attitude like, "Well, I don't really want to do this. . . ." [the teacher] just came up to me, he said, "You got your equipment, and you gonna get this done. I know you can do this, and you gonna do it. . . ." You know I did it! I'm like, "Well, God, I done it!" You know, the next time came around, you know, I had C. Next time, you know, I had a B.

A Detroit teen mother said her teachers called her on the phone whenever she was absent, asking if things were okay, if there were problems. Other students described participating in academic enrichment programs such as Upward Bound or community volunteer programs which enhanced their

self-esteem and provided positive experiences and taught skills with which to work toward future success.

Absence of Resources

When home and personal resources are lacking, the perception of the absence or presence of these external supports can have an important impact on school performance. One Milwaukee teen mother from a family with many problems said she enjoyed being in "regular" school until she became pregnant and had to go to a school for pregnant teens. She disliked the school, and felt the stigma of being placed and identified with others who had "problems." She subsequently dropped out and lost her motivation to attend. She felt that she needed help, but that none was available.

> I didn't really get no help, because I was afraid to ask anyone, you know. . . . They . . . . make you feel ashamed to ask and stuff, so I never said anything. . . . When you're at [X] School you feel out of place, you feel, you know, like you ain't no good and you feel like a lower class bum. That's the way I thought, like you was a tramp. . . . I feel like if I don't have any help soon, it's just going to be gone. What's a life that's messed up?

The personal accounts of 12 young mothers who reported no resources or support in any of the three categories highlight the traumatic circumstances in their lives. Of these, only three had managed to stay in or complete school. All had had lives of extreme deprivation. Early physical and sexual abuse, severe poverty, years of family strife leading to a series of informal and foster care placements, and expressions of sadness and loss for a missed childhood and youth fill their life stories. In the face of overwhelming burdens and the absence of any positive supports, schooling and other routine features of the typical adolescent's life gradually recede or are never part of their lives.

"Jameela," for example, was a teen mother and claimed that she began to lose interest in school because her pregnancy in the ninth grade made it "hard to get along with people at school." She attempted suicide after her second pregnancy in her senior year. Another young woman in this

group claims her grades began "falling down" as a result of being the victim of incest during the ninth grade. In addition she became alcoholic and bulimic.

> I guess it was just that I did it, it happened, and that I didn't have anyone to talk to. And that was building a wall between my studies and me and between the people I became withdrawn away from and people and stuff. I didn't want to be around people or anything. I just wanted, I was depressed a lot and just wanted to be alone mostly.

DISCUSSION

This analysis of educational experiences among a sample of 53 black women in two communities is consistent with other research showing that teen mothers generally achieve lower levels of education than do other young women (see also Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, and Morgan, 1987). This analysis, however, also reveals a great deal of diversity and complexity of experiences among teen mothers and nonparent peers not evident in objective measures of educational attainment alone. Several important themes emerge for further analysis and research which offer insight into effective strategies for enhancing educational commitments and performance among young women in the inner city.

Young mothers are more likely to leave or have difficulty in school than are childless peers. Yet in this study, many teen mothers were able to maintain age-appropriate grade levels or to graduate from high school, showing a strong or moderately strong attachment to school. Such mothers perceived that help was available, especially, though not exclusively, from their families. The young women who were completely detached from school were teen mothers who could identify no sources of support for their schooling. This comparison suggests that the worst educational consequences of early motherhood in this population may be mitigated by the intervention of caring individuals inside and external to the family and by nurturing the young women's personal strengths.

These findings also suggest that young inner-city black women face stresses and difficulties independent of motherhood which likely are detrimental to their education. Therefore, poor educational attainment in these communities should be understood as a problem resulting not only from adolescent childbearing but also from the negative forces of extreme poverty to which many youths are vulnerable.

This raises the important question of who is especially vulnerable to the most devastating consequences of poverty. The presence of clear personal strengths in many nonparent peers and some teen parents points to the need to study more closely the nature of individual attributes contributing to survival strengths, their origin, and how they can be nurtured. Studies in the developmental literature focus on a large, complex, and interactive set of protective factors that contribute to adaptive resiliency or "invulnerability" among children and youths exposed to stress (see, for example, Werner and Smith, 1982). Longitudinal studies suggest that neither individual personal characteristics, such as locus of control or self-esteem, nor simple environmental factors, such as family cohesion, can independently account for which youth will be successful despite the odds.

IMPLICATIONS

When young women do not receive from their families the consistent and meaningful support which is so important for girls to both develop as students and remain attached to the educational system, they must have access to other people who provide individual attention that is perceived as being part of a caring commitment to their well-being and future.

Ronald Taylor (1989) suggests that young men adopt different role models of success depending upon their age and stage of development and the relevance of such individuals for their current needs and goals. Similarly, the apparent importance of certain teachers, coaches, and other school personnel in the lives of the young women in our study who stayed in and enjoyed school suggests that providing teens with mentors or some other type of adult who can form a relationship

with them and who is particularly concerned about their schooling can compensate powerfully for deficits in other arenas of their lives. In optimal circumstances, the development of her identity as a student begins long before a young woman reaches high school. The young women in this study, however, suggest that access to a personal and caring relationship, even a relationship which begins during adolescence, may be helpful.

In addition, this study points to the importance students place upon an environment which sets and reinforces the expectation of achievement. The young women for whom expectations were set felt that they were being encouraged and made to feel capable of reaching those expectations. This was perceived as an expression of confidence and faith, important in motivating any youth, regardless of its source.

Social work practice in schools and youth-serving agencies in the inner cities should be focused to better assess the extent to which being a student and going to school are central to the young female client's sense of herself. Intervention plans that have school completion as part of their goals need to begin with an accurate picture of the youth's commitment. Practitioners must also assess the level of skills and support mechanisms available to facilitate the attachment to schooling, such as whether help with homework or role models of school success are present in the home. It may be that many teen-mother clients have one or more of these components in place but they are overwhelmed by such immediate concerns as a discouraging school environment, lack of child care, or emergency family crises.

Social work with inner-city teen women should provide opportunities for clients to express their interests and involvement in schooling rather than assuming their motivational level from their current educational status. Despite a great disparity in their levels of schooling, most of the young women in our study had not given up hope of attaining a better life through further training. Our programs need to be better targeted to build upon such hopes.

References

Clark, R. M. (1983). Family life and school achievement: Why poor black children succeed or fail. Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press.

Danziger, S. K., & Radin N. (1990). Absent does not equal uninvolved: Predictors of fathering in teen mother families. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 52, 636-642.

Farber, N. B. (1989). The significance of aspirations among unmarried adolescent mothers. Social Service Review, 63, 518-532.

Furstenberg, F., Brooks-Gunn, J., & Morgan, S. P. (1987). Adolescent mothers in later life. New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press.

Garmezy, N. (1988). Stressors of childhood. In N. Garmezy & M. Rutter (eds.), Stress, coping, and development in children (pp. 43-84). Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Glazer, N. (1986). Education and training programs and poverty. In S. H. Danziger & D. H. Weinberg (eds.), Fighting poverty: What works and what doesn't (pp. 152-173). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Hauser, S. T., Vieyra, M. A. B., Jacobson, A. M., & Wertlieb, D. (1989). Family aspects of vulnerability and resilience in adolescence: A theoretical perspective. In T. F. Dugan & R. Coles (eds.), The child in our times: Studies in the development of resiliency (pp. 109-133). New York, N.Y.: Brunner/Mazel Publishers.

Hayes, C. D. (1987). Risking the future: Adolescent sexuality, pregnancy, and childbearing. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

Hofferth, S. L., & Moore, K. A. (1979). Early childbearing and later economic well-being. American Sociological Review, 44, 784-815.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Moore, K. A., Simms, M. C., & Betsey, C. L. (1986). Choice and circumstance: Racial differences in adolescent sexuality and fertility. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books.

Mott, F. L., & Marsiglio, M. (1985). Early childbearing and completion of high school. Family Planning Perspectives, 17, 234-237.

New York Urban League. (1984). Status of black New York: A study. New York, N.Y.: New York Urban League.

Ogbu, J. U. (1985). A cultural ecology of competence among inner-city blacks. In M. B. Spencer, G. B. Brookins, & W. A. Allen (eds.), Beginnings: The social and affective development of black children (pp. 45-66). Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Ogbu, J. U. (1988). Black education: A cultural-ecological perspective. In H. P. McAdoo (ed.), Black families: Second edition (pp. 169-184). Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Patton, M. Q. (1980). Qualitative evaluation methods. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Taylor, R. L. (1989). Black youth, role models and the social construction of identity. In R. L. Jones (ed.), Black adolescents (pp. 155-174). Berkeley, Calif.: Cobb and Henry Publishers.

Tobias, R. (1989). Educating black urban adolescents: Issues and programs. In R. L. Jones (ed.), Black adolescents (pp. 207-227). Berkeley, Calif.: Cobb and Henry Publishers.

Waite, L. J., & Moore, K. A. (1978). The impact on an early first birth on young women's educational attainment. Social Forces, 56, 845-865.

Werner, E. E., & Smith, R. S. (1982). Vulnerable but invincible: A longitudinal study of resilient children and youth. New York, N.Y.: McGraw-Hill.

Wilson, W. J. (1987). The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy. Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press.